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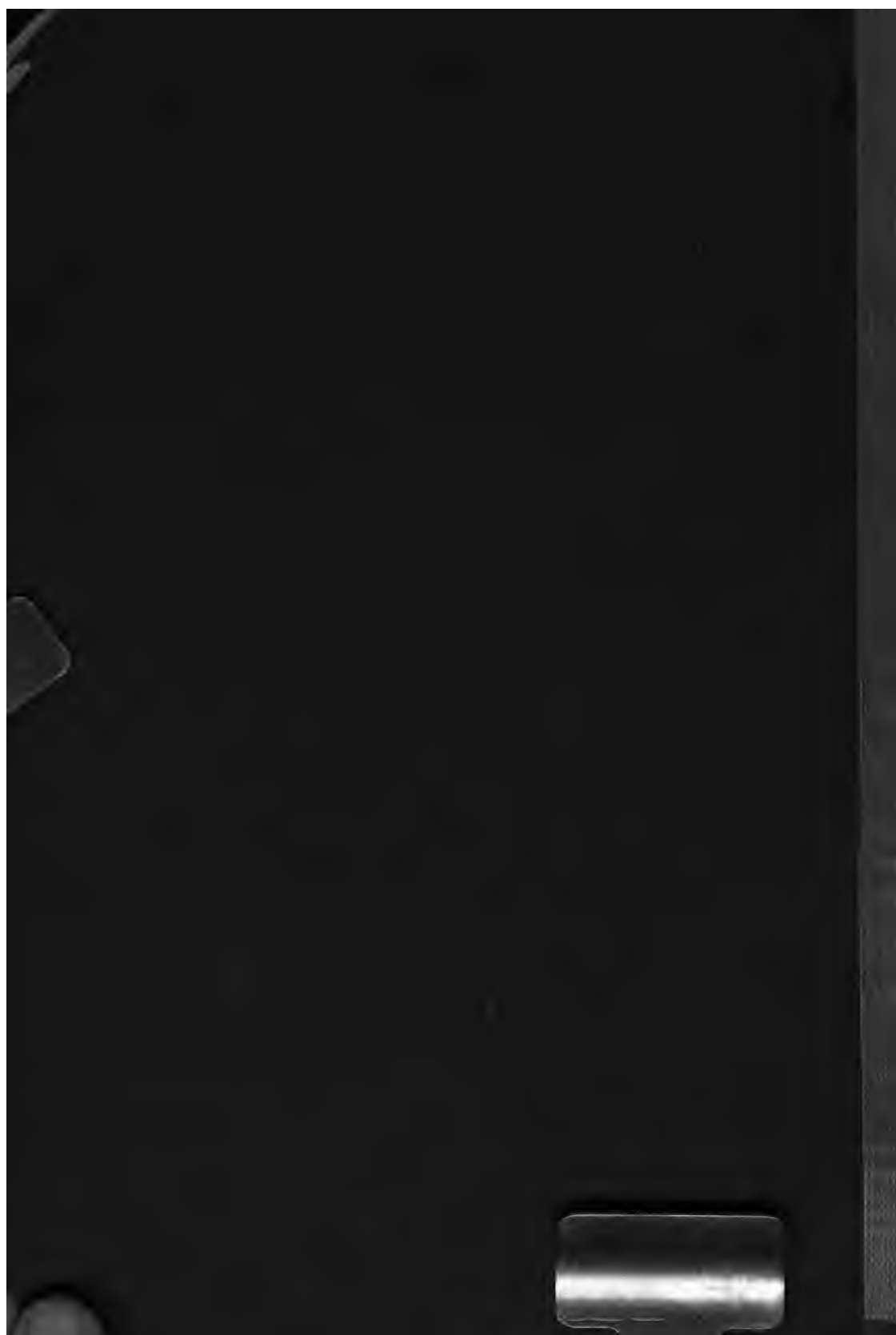
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The Function of Death

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THE FUNCTION *of* DEATH IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE

By

GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER, 1855-1909



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19 May 1944

THE FUNCTION OF DEATH IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The last enemy that shall be abolished is death (I Cor. 15:26).

For the modern mind, the fear of demons is no more—gone through the influence of both science and religion. With demons gone, darkness has ceased to be the terror that it once was. Then, too, disasters are increasingly averted, partly by triumph over darkness, partly by technical skill. One by one, slowly enough, diseases are giving way before the victorious march of scientific medicine. Death remains. Death is no man's friend, cries one; an enemy, the "last enemy," says Paul. Some live all their lifetime in fear of death. To be sure, there are those who sigh for death, but this is because they are dead before they die—because the values summed up in the word "life" have become so valueless to them that death seems the better portion.

But death is to be abolished—this is an old religious faith and, it would seem, a new scientific conviction. As to the latter, Bergson pictures the whole of humanity as one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance and to clear the most formidable obstacles,

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perhaps even death. Thus, men are to triumph over death by not dying! Others, like Metchnikoff, allow that it is forever "appointed unto men once to die," but hope, by abolishing diseases, by learning how to live right, and by thus lengthening out the human span to two or three times its present possible length, to overcome the fear of death and to cultivate contentment, if not actual joy, in our mortality. It is the death that springs upon us like a wild beast, and does not rest until it has torn us to pieces, or the death that does its dreadful work insidiously and secretly until one's power of resistance breaks down, or the death that nips the human bud before it unfolds, withers bloom before it brings forth fruit, plucks fruit before it can ripen—it is this death that would seem to be indeed no man's friend. But if men were to die full of years and weary of life, if life went out only as a candle does, burnt down to its socket, if life's full wish had been fulfilled, if one did not die until one wanted to, then one could comprehend the event, for then it would be man closing his earthly existence at the end of his long day's work.

Or we might grant that death is in itself no man's friend and yet comfort ourselves with the reflection that it makes virtues and values possible which more than compensate for the evil. Should we have religion and philosophy if there were no death? Should we have a sense of the seriousness and urgency of life if there were no death? Should we have an

effective admonition to give life its highest worth, to improve the time, to fill the world with good deeds, if there were no death? But I must return to this later.

There are others of our human brothers who look upon death as an unmitigated evil. All our consolations and explanations are inadequate, they urge, and we must be satisfied with everlasting dissatisfaction as we confront the bitter fact of our mortality. Stoical resignation—sagacious indulgence: this is our alternative, in view of the shortness of life, the cruelty of the world, the irrevocableness of destiny. Their counsel is: Do not think about death, do not allow the thought to obtrude, and if it does, banish it as soon as you can.

There is of course a grain of truth in this counsel. The strong and wise man who strives, fights, creates, does not brood over death, but firmly and unflinchingly fixes his eyes upon the requirements of the hour and the tasks of the future, unmindful of the common human lot which will come to him, too, by and by. But this is neither resignation nor indulgence. Nor is it the ostrich-like make-believe in our attitude to death. Death cannot be abolished by forgetting. To triumph over death, not by preoccupation and oblivion thereto, but by *remembering*, that would be triumph indeed! Our fathers were wont to think much upon death, to read often what their Bibles said upon the subject, to preach and to sing about death. They may have gone to

an extreme, but, for all that, in the face of the apparent finality of death, the phoenix of their hope arose ever anew out of the ashes of their despair. I am sure that we have gone to the other extreme, and because we have we are not *masters* of death as they were. We are its slaves. We are not free. And our religious life is suffering because of our way of trying to triumph over death by shirking the thought of it.

And so, in the midst of our modern bewilderment and distress, our dread and cowardice, I am not without hope that you may care to think with me a little while upon this subject. For no one understands life who does not also understand death. At all events, death is one of the most important factors, if not *the* most important, of our existence, precisely as important as birth itself. It is a fact of boundless range, a reality that surrounds us every moment, that speaks to us in every throb of the heart. But it is with death as it is with all the great simple basic facts of our outer and inner life—as it is with air and light and the stream of time and the beating of the heart—we do not *sense* them, just because they are so mighty, so constant, so obvious. And yet there is something overmastering and mysterious in the way our whole manifold and passionate life rests upon the dark waters of death into which it must soon sink again. The fact is so great that, as I say, we who want to understand the mystery of life should now and

then dedicate an hour of our church service to death.

Death casts its dark shadow upon all of us, obscures and jeopardizes our happiness. We mean by happiness the will to live. It would seem, then, that death was the peculiar foe of happiness. This will to live is so deeply rooted in all of us that life itself is frequently viewed as happiness—any kind of life being preferred to death, the one great unhappiness. But we can never be happy, if we have not conquered “the last enemy which is death.” The question of our happiness is largely a question as to how we can gain the victory over death, how we can make the master our servant, the foe our friend. From the beginning—according to the old Book of Genesis—man was set to have dominion over the earth; and death is one of earth’s things over which he is to have dominion. But how?

Time was when death was looked upon as a punishment for sin. One man sinned and death entered the world by sin. Such a view must infinitely intensify the fear of death. [That life is a punishment of life one may well believe.] But to hold death as punishment, that no man should do upon the basis of reason, but only upon the basis of absolute and immediate revelation.

Again, death has been pictured as a great door through which men passed from the partial and divided happiness of earth into the full and unclouded joy of eternal bliss. There was a time when this

was a real and positive conviction. Such believers there are still—men and women who say: I desire to depart and be with Christ; for me to live is Christ, to die is gain. And it may be that many of us envy these good people the happiness of this naïve faith. That is not the question now. And it is not so much the fact as the *form* of this fact which gives us pause. But the main point is that a life which constantly looks beyond the grave for a happiness in which there shall be no grave, and no death, is self-destructive, blinds the eyes to what lies on this side of the grave, falsifies life's values and life's happiness which are here and now. To seek a happiness which no eye has seen and no ear heard, that in the end is to sacrifice the most certain to the most uncertain. What is worse, it is to subject one's self to that class of ecclesiastics whose business it is to claim and carry the keys to this transcendent and inconceivable bliss, and who hold out the prospect of entrance into this bliss to those only who sell their happiness and life here for the bliss there. Thus, not indeed death itself, but the *idea of the cause and effect* of death became a fearful weapon for the exploitation and subjugation of man. The belief that death itself would bring eternal life created an anxiety and fear about life which constantly endangered the outlook for eternal happiness; and the servility of such fear ultimately deceived the soul that was hungering for happiness as to what that happiness really was.

In our day we must cease to think of death as punishment of sin or as a door out of life. We gain no light upon the dark problem until we realize that death signifies a necessary order of life itself. Death is a natural necessity. Death could say: "I, whom you reproach as the destroyer of life, I am really life's great friend. Without me, life would not be living; I am life's depth, its beauty and zest, and passion." Death is life's friend—what can that mean? Is it not the dearest dream of the human heart that death shall be no more? Is not this why in our day men hang with bated breath upon Bergson's and Metchnikoff's words which I recalled at the outset? Do we not wish to sit at the meal of existence until we are full to satiety? Should we not like to drive the old man with the scythe out of life's garden?

O my friends, I fear that all the trees and flowers of that garden would then wither and waste away. In nature's everlasting alternation of origination and decay, death is the great rejuvenator. [Life is movement and mutation. Everything new that comes to be life buries an old, and if the old were no longer buried, no longer would the new be born. A life without death, a life in which death signified only a contingency, would be life without growth, at bottom would be no life at all, but would itself be death.] What would an everlasting spring be? What a day without a night? Bounds belong to all that is earthly, else it loses its power. Death sets



a goal to life—it articulates our life in the limits of space and time. In this way, it makes life something definite, measurable, tangible, just *our* human life, which would have no true human content without the succession of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It is at the graves over which we march that we first note that we live at all; it is over against what has been, what lies behind us, that we feel ourselves to be living and present, that we feel within our being the pulsing heart-beat of the world. It is the fact that our days have their end and goal that binds and holds all their moments together, that brings one into the other, so that each moment becomes a human moment, with all the height and depth that each of them hides away within its own wondrous being. The shortness of time is the eternal admonition to redeem the time, to improve the opportunity. The seriousness of death is the consecration of life, the strength of love, the spur to action. Every joy gets its glow from the feeling that it comes to us but once. This *once-ness* is the secret melancholy at the heart of every pleasure, which yet heightens the pleasure. Why is each hour so important? Because it comes only once and never again. Why is each task so full of meaning? Because it requires decisions which can never be repeated. Why is life so real and earnest? Because we must hasten! Thus it is the background of death that gives life its depth, its urgency, its seriousness. So there breaks out of

time the fire of eternity which consumes time. Transitoriness is the form in which eternity reveals itself to us. Death necessarily belongs to life. To see this, not to devote one's thinking and willing and feeling to the vain effort of forgetting or eliminating death, is to win the victory over death.

Said Death to Life,
"All things are mine";
Said Life to Death,
"And *thou* art thine."

When we see that death is our friend we have won the victory. Night is our friend. Is it not good that there is not simply a hot, clear day, but also a still, mysterious night with the eternal stars shining in the beauty of the blue above? We could not endure the day without the night. And we could not endure life without death. Often life makes us so weary. Sometimes a longing for death steals over young hearts, both in the midst of pleasure and in the pain of youthful seeking and seething. To be sure, much of this is fleeting sentiment, shadows of clouds in a sunny day. But this play of sentiment ceases when life's little day has worn on apace. It does not fit into the earnestness of life. Deeper feelings take its place in the soul. Youth ever hopes that things will come out right in the end, but age sees the insufficiency of life. We know that certain shipwrecks which we have suffered cannot simply be forgotten and erased from our life.] We have had too much experience with ourselves to

hope with so much confidence that there shall yet be as bright and big a day as we once dreamed. Disillusions, errors, reproaches, darknesses, accumulate in our lives. We wander among broken idols. So much that is already dead gathers up in a human existence! Dead loves, dead friendships, outlived errors, aye, outlived ideals also, poisoned relationships, wilted flowers, gravestones—in short, so much death! And there is only *one* redemption from all this death, and that is death itself. What a rest and refreshment for the weary and wounded heart! Often life seems so confined and moldy, like a dark and stuffy room, where we lie dreaming feverish dreams—then the thought of death is like a window out of which we may fly to cool the brow, and to see the peaceful stars in the great, quiet, pure, sacred night! How good it is that there is a night for our life, and not simply a long endless day! Day comes with its thousand pettinesses, humiliates us, robs us of happiness and peace. Very well, let us be comforted; the night comes, holy night! What does it amount to that people say this or that about us? Why fret over the few broken and blasted joys when we must die tomorrow? Let us wander out of life's clang and clatter into the still and sacred night, mount aloft, greet the stars, be quiet and glad, cooled and pacified by the air of eternity. Ever and anon in the stress and storm of life, let us think of death, and this thought will be a marvelous cure for our whole being.


But death is not simply life's friend and benefactor, it is also life's interpreter. It tells us better than any science or philosophy can what life really is and ought to be. Have you ever been at death's door? Then did you not at such a time pass through the deepest experiences of your life? Was not the truth of life clearer to you than ever before? Did you not see, as in the light of the Judgment Day, what was true and what was false in your life? Did you not discern the meaning of life, and the perversity with which fools evaluate things, overlook the true values and run after false ones? Did you not feel how stupid and inert our existence ordinarily is, how far from truth and reality, and did you not resolve never to forget what you saw in that clear hour of death's revelations?

But if we have not faced death ourselves, we have stood by the deathbed of loved ones. It was an instructive hour beyond compare. God spoke so powerfully to us that our souls bowed to the earth before the weight of his words. The truth of life was revealed. The world faded from us. Life's big woes, life's bitter struggles, how they shriveled into insignificance there! How could we grade the things of life according to their worth, were it not for death? Death is a hot fire which burns up the hay and stubble of vanity, and leaves the genuine gold of life purified. "In the hour and article of death"—to use a phrase of our fathers—what seems important to us? The honors we longed for, the

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victories we achieved by having our own way and will, the satisfying of our thirst for revenge, the hours of pleasure, the triumph of our pride, the exaction of our rights? How these things seem petty and unworthy now! How gladly we would cast them aside and put other things in their places which seem to us at present of much less value! In the solemn hour of death how great the plain fulfilment of the duties of love and faithfulness seems! Oh, how we curse our selfishness, which blinds and hardens us so that we cannot see the truth of life! Of all the genuine laws of life, love is the supreme and all-controlling one. Death, the greatest fact of life, is the strongest witness to the truth of the gospel. It is death that lets us see and be sure of a higher order of things, of love and loyalty, of truth and goodness. At death no one doubts that this higher order is the true order. Therefore death is something great. Therefore death makes man great. We now know how to prepare for death. We now know how we can stand before death unafraid. What of ourselves do we leave behind us for other men, when we must go hence? Is that which we have given to men, is that which we shall leave to men, worth our living for? Are men stronger, truer, freer, because we have lived? Is there a human soul in the world to whom we have been a necessity? Is there someone who has found in us a revelation of God, who has had a vision of the life of God, of the love of God, in and through us? If so, we have



known happiness upon the earth, we have fulfilled our calling in life, and death cannot bear witness against us.

[And the after-life? Inasmuch as while we know that there is a connection between mind and brain, we do not know that this connection is a *necessary* connection, science leaves room for faith, science cannot say that the death of the brain involves of necessity the death of the mind.] There is room for hope. Not vetoed by science, love believeth all things, hopeth all things, and love never faileth. I do not mean to say, even if science made faith and hope and love seem absurd, that they would not outweary the absurdity and the contradiction and urge their requirements. I believe that they would. At all events, I do not mean to close my sermon without a word about the life after death.

In the moment when we become dust, we realize most powerfully that there is something in us that is more than dust. More than dust! For, O my friends, precisely the greatness that flames forth in death points beyond death. I have been saying that we know so much of death—it serves life, illumines life, augments life. Thus it is not death, but life, that has the last word in God's world. Death is not the last; it is only a form of the development of life, not the annihilation of life. This is the presupposition upon which everything depends.

I have been saying that death is friend and benefactor. But I must not forget. I must not

beguile or befool myself. I think of the battlefields of the bloody world. I think of the children that scarcely bloom before they wither. I think of the men whom death breaks in the years of their best strength, unmindful of whether they are so bitterly necessary to their own or to the world. I think of all that is incomprehensible, cruel, and ghastly in death. I see that, after all, there is a feeling in all of us that death is something unnatural, something which does not fit into God's world. This feeling is mirrored in the story of Paradise. Painters have ever tried to limn the nameless horror of the first parents who saw their son dead and did not know what death was. The savage has this feeling still. The horror of death tells us in thunderous tones that there is something enigmatic, terrible, unnatural in it. Again we wander out into the night, not now into the starry night, but into an unfriendly and unfamiliar darkness which suffocates us. O death, how bitter thou art!

But in the darkness of death there have ever been men who could not believe in death. I say "believe," for death, like life, is a thing of faith and not of science. These men have sought for life, and seers speak of a light which falls from beyond the grave over on this side to us. Greek philosophers, with elevation of soul, preach their faith in an immortal substance of us, Godlike and ineffable, and try to picture to us a life beyond, full of beauty and depth. Never have intimations been wanting

